

Random Encounters

Nasty Surprises

By Jeff Quick



Magic Item Loss

Death, as discussed, is a mild annoyance for most player characters. Ability score loss is tough, but not too scary, since most characters find access to saving throw enhancement effects by the time the reckoning comes due. Losing magic items, however, is a peril stiff enough to make players spill their dice.

Magic items are one of the big ways characters are differentiated from one another, and a great deal of the mastery players feel comes through their stuff. Thus, threatening magic items doesn't simply reduce a character's effectiveness, it actually threatens the total existence of the character. Losing a magic item reduces a character's all-around coolness, and there's no game system or dedicated spell to back a character up when she loses her *mace of disruption*. That's scary stuff.

A simple way of depriving characters is theft of major items. Players might be willing to blow off the loss of a potion or scroll. Losing armor, weapons, or important wondrous items, however, is big enough that they'll want to go track it down and punish the thief.



Making items go away permanently is even scarier. A *sphere of annihilation* or *bag of devouring* is a one-way ticket to gonesville for most items. You don't want to use those tricks more than once or the scare fades. But that first time will be plenty.

Long-time DMs know that the classic option for magic item removal is the much-loathed disenchanter beast from the *Fiend Folio*. Warning: Though it seems an obvious choice, the disenchanter beast is possibly the worst method for scaring players with magic item loss. As advertised, disenchanter beasts can easily take magic items out of the game. However, their role is famous for being solely to get rid of a character's magic items. In reality, disenchanter beasts are a heavy-handed DM enforcer. Experienced players know this, and they don't get scared. They get annoyed.

A preferable option is the ethereal filcher, which serves many of the same purposes as the disenchanter beast, but has the advantage of being less well known. Ethereal filchers are not a permanent alternative, but they can be harder to retrieve if the filcher abandons stolen items in the Ethereal Plane. Here's an example of this kind of pernicious magic thief:

Esmek

Esmek is an unusually smart ethereal filcher who works in the employ of a red dragon. The dragon has many spies in the surrounding wilderness. When it learns of approaching adventurers, it sends Esmek invisibly to remove key items. It tries to approach when PCs are resting or after a battle with another monster. In a pinch, it also just grabs items from alert, but distracted characters.

Esmek has more focus than most ethereal filchers, and it looks for good stuff, such as powerful scrolls and unready magic weapons. When discovered, it bolts immediately for safety near the dragon, who trades Esmek's good finds for less powerful, but shinier items.

Ethereal filchers don't speak, but Esmek communicates telepathically when the dragon wants to contact it.

Esmek: Ethereal filcher rogue 2; CR 5; Medium aberration; HD 5d8 plus 2d6; hp 29; Init +9; Spd 40 ft.; AC 19, touch 16, flat-footed 14; Atk +4 melee (1d4, bite) or +11 ranged (1d8+1/19-20, masterwork light crossbow with +1 *thundering crossbow bolts*); SA sneak attack +1d6; SQ darkvision 60 ft., detect magic, ethereal jaunt, evasion, trapfinding; AL N; SV Fort +1, Ref +9, Will +5; Str 10, Dex 20, Con 11, Int 11, Wis 12, Cha 9.

Skills and Feats: Escape Artist +7, Hide +8, Jump +5, Listen +13, Move Silently +9, Spot +13, Tumble +9; Dodge, Improved Initiative, Mobility.

Detect Magic (Su): Esmek can use *detect magic* as the spell (caster level 5th) at will.

Ethereal Jaunt (Su): Esmek can shift from the Ethereal Plane to the Material Plane as part of any move action and shift back again as a free action. He can remain on the Ethereal Plane for 1 round before

returning to the Material Plane. The ability is otherwise identical to the *ethereal jaunt* spell (caster level 15th).

Evasion (Ex): If exposed to any effect that normally allows a character to attempt a Reflex saving throw for half damage, Esmek takes no damage with a successful saving throw.

Trapfinding: Esmek can use the Search skill to find traps with Search DCs higher than 20.

Possessions: Masterwork light crossbow, 20 +1 *thundering bolts*, +1 *ring of protection*, *ring of Dexterity* +2, 4 tanglefoot bags, 4 thunderstones.

The scary part of this kind of encounter comes through foreknowledge. Dropping this on players isn't as effective as sowing dread first by warning what's ahead. Have NPCs deliver reports from nearly destroyed expeditions that sought the same goals that the PCs have. Tales of missing weapons and utter routs come from the mouths of the bloodied survivors. They don't know what happened to their magic, but its lack cost them dearly. The PCs may try to avoid the same mistakes, but the only mistakes the survivors know about are the mysterious disappearance of their magic.

Coming in Part 4 of Nasty Surprises

Well, you've taken away some items, perhaps. Why not replace them with some items that can not only aid the PCs but also assist the villains of your game!

[Return to Main Page](#)
